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AUTHOR McDougall, D. C.
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ABSTRACT

The discussion of Spanish verbs considers the problems of tense and aspect. Two tenses are used in the description: past and non-past. The past tense is considered the marked member and the non-past the unmarked member. Aspect is considered in terms of "telic" verbs which express an action tending towards a goal, and "atelic" verbs which do not have to wait for a goal for their realization, but are realized as soon as they begin. The author provides examples of verbs with these classifications in mind and demonstrates how tense and aspect help form the meaning of the verbs. (VM)

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A DESCRIPTION OF THE FUNCTIONAL SYSTEM OF THE SPANISH VERB

D. C. McDougall, University of Victoria

This paper will consist of a consideration of "the type of information carried by the verb"[1] in Spanish and of how the system is organized. The discussion and treatment below will be essentially in terms of a previously established formal system.

The verb has been defined, and still is defined in many grammars and language manuals as an action word. This sort of definition, whether expressed in these trite terms or in a somewhat more refined version has no place in this paper. The verb can be established as a category, first of all, formally, by its morphemic combinatory potential, and, secondly, syntactically, by the syntagmatic arrangements in which it may occur. Any conceptual definition is unnecessary and irrelevant. This is not to deny that some sort of semantic classification of verbs is a valuable adjunct to a study of the verb, but only insofar as it is considered in relation to the particular grammatical functions of the verb.

Before looking at the Spanish verb system in particular, I would like to consider two specific problems: that of time and tense and that of aspect.

Firstly, time and tense. As Palmer[1] has pointed out, most people expect that the verb will tell them something about time, and, as far as English and Spanish are concerned, this is perfectly true. Together with this simple statement of fact, however, there must go a strong caveat. Calver[2] regards the question of time as the most difficult problem and the most likely to cause confusion in any attempt to isolate the meaning of verb forms. He questions many of the ideas about time that Jespersen[3] and Bull[4] consider axiomatic for an understanding of the workings of the verb, and cites Bergson, Russell and Alexander as suggesting different conceptions of time. Bull, working from his conception of time, establishes a hypothetical tense system and proceeds to consider the tense systems of various languages in terms of his hypothetical system.

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The approach in this paper is an attempt to avoid some of the pitfalls that lie in the imposition of a preconceived idea of time on the verb system by working in terms of the formal system of the verb. The Spanish Academy in its Grammar analyzes the Spanish verb system in terms of a threefold division of time; namely, the past, the present and the future. This results in the following scheme:

Past	-	compraba, compró
Present	-	compra
Future	-	comprará

The problem then arises as to where the form compraría is accommodated, since it is left out of the time scheme. This dilemma, however, is speedily, if unsatisfactorily, resolved by establishing it as a mood, the Conditional Mood (el modo potencial), which completely obscures the formal and functional relationship between the forms comprará and compraría.

The obvious relationship of these forms is shown in:

Juan:	Lo comprará.
Pablo:	¿Qué dijo Juan?
María:	Dijo que lo compraría.

Here the form compraría functions, in indirect speech, as the backshift equivalent of comprará.

The treatment of the Spanish verb system presented below is in terms of two tenses, Past and Non-Past. The term tense, referring to the type of time reference expressed by the verb, is employed only in this restricted sense. It is important to maintain a clear distinction between tense, which is a linguistic term, and time, which is a universal concept, for any analysis based on the equation "tense = time" is bound to result in endless confusions and incongruities. In the tense contrast, the Past tense is considered as the marked member, both formally and functionally, and Non-Past the unmarked member.

Secondly, the question of aspect. Before discussing aspect, it will be useful to introduce a term to refer to the sort of meaning that verbs have, and we shall follow the procedure of Strang[5] by adopting below the term "action" in this respect, thus avoiding a more wordy paraphrase.

One of the fundamental problems with regard to aspect is that of terminology. The term aspect, like the term tense, has tended to vary its meaning, to a greater or lesser extent, from author to author. An over-vague definition or use soon proves of little value; for example,

Hockett's[6] statement that "aspects have to do, not with the location of an event in time, but with its temporal distribution or contour" serves to distinguish aspects from tenses, but little more.

Goedsche[7] makes the point that the confusion about aspect seems to lie in the failure to distinguish between verb content and verbal aspect, and states that "verbal aspect does not find expression through verb content but through grammatical forms of differing degrees of completeness." This distinction between the two levels of grammar and lexis is fundamental to a proper understanding of aspect, both generally and within a particular language system.

The danger of confusing the function of a grammatical form and the semantic content of a predication is one that must be very carefully avoided in order to arrive at a full understanding and a proper evaluation of how each form functions in relation to any particular semantic categories which may be established. Garey[8] suggests the two terms "grammatical aspect" and "lexical aspect" to refer to these two levels and these terms will be adopted in this paper. Lexical aspect refers to the type of "action" of a particular verb or verb construction and will be discussed immediately below; grammatical aspect refers to aspectual modifications that the same verb or verb construction may undergo within the verb system of a particular language. The latter belongs to the formal, or grammatical, system of the language, i.e. a closed set; the former to the lexis or semantics of the language, i.e. an open-ended set.

The confusion of the two levels of grammar and lexis in the question of aspect does not just refer to such obvious semantic considerations as, for instance, those shown in the description of to begin to read as the inceptive aspect of to read, but to far more subtle confusions. Allen[9] cites an example from The Use of Tenses in English by J. Millington-Ward which will serve to indicate this point. With reference to the English Present Perfect, Millington-Ward distinguishes between the "finished" use of the form, as in:

John has written a book,

and its "unfinished" use, as in:

John has lived in New York for many years.

Allen remarks on the obvious point that Millington-Ward has missed completely; namely, that, whereas the predication to write a book implies an end, the predication to live in New York does not.

Garey provides a test-frame which shows this difference quite clearly. He suggests that verbs, or verb constructions, may be placed in one of two categories according to the answer to the following question:

> "If one was 'verbing,' but was interrupted while 'verbing,' has one 'verbed?'"

According to this test-frame, the two sentences from Millington-Ward belong in different categories.

> If one was writing a book, but was interrupted while writing, has one written a book?

The answer is clearly no.

> If one was living in New York, but was interrupted while living there, has one lived in New York?

The answer is clearly yes.

The first scholar to approach the problem of lexical aspect in a systematic way with regard to Spanish was Andrés Bello,[10] who divided Spanish verbs into two categories. He makes the point that "en unos verbos el atributo, por el hecho de haber llegado a su perfección, expira, y en otros, sin embargo, subsiste durando; a los primeros llamo desinentes, y a los segundos permanentes." Bello gives morir and hacer as examples of desinent verbs and ser, ver and oír as examples of permanent verbs.

Bello's analysis provides a useful starting point though, in itself, it is an oversimplification. Bull and Farley[11] take up the categories established by Bello, well aware, however, of the limitations of his study, and question the "assumption that it is the verb, rather than what the verb symbolizes, that is to be classified." They introduce two new terms from the field of physics, "cyclic" and non-cyclic," which roughly equate with the terms desinent and permanent that Bello uses. They agree with Bello that "the most distinguishing feature of cyclic action (Bello's desinent verbs) is that its completion, that is, its perfection, coincides automatically with its termination." An important conclusion that is drawn from this is that "by their very nature cyclic actions cease as soon as the cycle is completed and can only give the appearance of continuing by being repeated, by becoming a series of cycles."

This can be illustrated by using the example that Bull and Farley give: to get up. We can say:

> John got up. Juan se levantó.

The action is perfected and, therefore, terminated and cannot be prolonged, or, to use Bull and Farley's terms, the cycle is completed.

If we say:

John is getting up. Juan se levanta.

the action is not perfected and the cycle is not complete.

And if we say:

John gets up early. Juan se levanta temprano.

this now refers to a series of events and is, therefore, no longer cyclic, for a series can be prolonged indefinitely, whereas a cyclic event cannot. All series are, therefore, non-cyclic.

The distinguishing feature of non-cyclic "actions" (Bello's permanent verbs) is that their perfection coincides with their initiation. "To say that an action of this type began is equivalent to saying that it took place." If we consider the verb ver (one of Bello's examples) we can see that to say empiezo a ver is equivalent to saying veo. If you begin to see something, you do actually see it.

It is possible to construct a test-frame along these lines, similar to that of Garey:

He began to "verb," but stopped. He did/did not "verb."

Garey, in his study of aspect with regard to French, also establishes the two categories of "actions." His discussion starts with a consideration of the verb se noyer, and consists of an evaluation of the difference, if any, between the following forms:

The statement - Il se noyait.
And the question - S'est-il noyé?

The answer to the question must obviously be that he did not drown (as far as is known, that is). Garey makes the point that "one possible solution is to say that there are two homonymous verbs se noyer, of which one implies death, the other not. This "logical solution" is impracticable and unnecessary as the difference in meaning correlates with a difference of form, and it is therefore possible to consider these different verb forms as modifying, in some way, the "action" of se noyer.

The categories established are "telic" verbs (to which se noyer belongs) "which express an action tending towards a goal;" and "atelic" verbs "which do not have to wait for a goal for their realization, but are realized as soon as they begin." The verb nager is given as an example of an atelic verb.

At this juncture it is probably advisable to assess possible confusions that might arise through an imprecise terminology. The term "perfect" (similarly "perfected" and "perfective") is recognized by Twaddell[12] as a possible source of confusion in the understanding of the English "have + participle" construction. As Twaddell points out,"there need be no implication of completion in the sense of non-continuation of the action at the present moment. The term "perfect" has been unhelpful by suggesting some kind of completion or previous termination. . . ." Below we shall employ the terminology suggested by Garey, that is, we shall refer to "imperfective" and "perfective" grammatical aspect, and lexical aspect will be considered in terms of the two categories "telic" and "atelic." By "perfective aspect" of a form, we mean that the form, in combination with a telic "action" indicates perfection of the "action;" and by "imperfective aspect" of a form, we mean that the form, in combination with a telic "action" indicates the non-perfection of the "action." The grammatical aspects, therefore, are labelled according to the result of their combination with a telic "action."

In the light of what I have just been considering, I would like now to look at the Spanish verb system.

The procedure followed is similar to that adopted by Stockwell, Bowen and Martin,[13] i. e., the establishment of a primary system and various secondary patterns. Unfortunately, in this paper, I only have time to consider the primary system.

PRIMARY SYSTEM

	Past	Non-Past
Perfective	habló	
	comió	
	vivió	
	(Preterite)	
Imperfective	hablaba	habla
	comía	come
	vivía	vive
	(Imperfect)	(Present)

NON-PAST

Telic + Imperfective Non-Past:

Como una manzana.

The time reference is to the moment of speech. The "action" is not perfected, and the event is not terminated.

Escribo un libro.

The time reference may be to the moment of speech or to a period of time encompassing the moment of speech. The "action" is not perfected and the event is not terminated.

Atelic + Imperfective Non-Past:

Juan duerme bien.

The time reference may be to the moment of speech or to a period of time encompassing the moment of speech. The "action" is perfected and the event or series of events is not terminated.

PAST

Perfective	Imperfective
cantó	cantaba
llegó	llegaba
(Preterite)	(Imperfect)

The Preterite and the Imperfect contrast in terms of aspect, but not in terms of tense. The Imperfect represents the imperfective aspect. The Preterite represents the Perfective aspect, which may be further considered as comprising an initiative aspect, where the event is considered at its beginning and a terminative aspect, where the event is considered at its end.

The contrast between the Preterite and the Imperfect is essentially one of aspect, "no temporal, sino de aspecto" in the words of Alarcos Llorach,[14] who goes on to express the opposition as follows: "cantaba indica el proceso sin su término, y es el miembro no marcado de la oposición; canté indica el proceso con su término, y es el miembro positivo." This seems a clear and straightforward statement of the situation and is a widely accepted assessment of the contrast. It is, however, not quite as straightforward as it appears at first sight. We

must first determine what Alarcos Llorach means exactly by the expressions el proceso con su término and el proceso sin su término. There seem to be two possible interpretations:

(1) the term proceso equates with our use of the term "action" and término refers to its perfection, or,

(2) the term proceso refers to the event and término to its termination.

If we consider Alarcos Llorach's example cantar (an atelic "action") in the light of (1), we see that both canté and cantaba are perfected and that Alarcos Llorach's statement cannot hold. In the light of (2) above, the statement appears, at first, to be more correct; i. e., canté presents the event as terminated and cantaba as not terminated. The most frequently cited example in support of the claim (held by the present writer) that the Preterite does not always present the event as terminated is taken from Genesis:

Dijo Dios, sea la luz, (y la luz fue.
(
(y hubo la luz.

It is obviously incorrect to suggest in this instance that the event is terminated; there is no implication in hubo or fue that there later ceased to be light. Bull gives another example:

> "A car stopped running because of a faulty wire. A mechanic replaced the wire, 'y luego funcionó maravillosamente.'"

There is no implication in the form funcionó that the car later ceased to work.

Clearly, then, some distinction must be made between the combination of the Preterite and the Imperfect with atelic and telic "actions."

Telic + Preterite:

> Comí una manzana.
> Compraron tres caballos.
> Lo hicieron tres veces.

The "action" is perfected and the event is terminated (the terminative aspect of the perfective). Both are anterior to the moment of speech.

Atelic + Preterite:

> Juan cantó.

The "action" is perfected; only the initiation of the event is explicitly expressed (the initiative aspect of the perfective). Both are anterior to the moment of speech.

The distinction between the initiative aspect produced by the combination "atelic + Preterite" and the terminative aspect produced by the combination "telic + Preterite" is not always patently clear and this lack of clarity is undoubtedly the reason for statements such as that of Alarcos Llorach mentioned above.

For example, if we consider:

Juan llegó ayer. (telic + Preterite)

and,

Juan cantó ayer. (atelic + Preterite),

there seems to be no immediately apparent difference. If, however, we consider these two predications related with reference to a specific point of time in the past, as in:

Juan llegó a la una ayer.

and,

Juan cantó a la una ayer. (atelic + Preterite),

the difference becomes clear. John began to sing at one o'clock, but he didn't begin to arrive at one o'clock. He finished arriving at one o'clock. For the implied initiative aspect to become explicit, it is sometimes necessary to relate the predication to a specific point of time. The apparent ambivalence of cantó is caused by the very nature of the "action" involved, which cannot be indefinitely prolonged (in theory it can, in practice it cannot). However, with the atelic "action" saber, which is capable of indefinite prolongation, the initiative aspect produced by its combination with the Preterite is always evident, as in:

Supe la verdad. "I found out the truth."

This fact has been badly misrepresented by many teaching grammars of Spanish, which treat the Preterite of saber as in some way peculiar. They give English lexical equivalents for supe and sabía, but fail to point out that this difference is caused by the difference in form, and that the contrast between supe and sabía is a normal functional contrast of Spanish.

Telic + Imperfect:

Juan comía una manzana.

The "action" is not perfected and the event is considered without reference to beginning or end. As with the combination "telic + Non-Past" the reference may be either to a point or period of time, as in:

Escribía un libro.

It is important to stress here that the time reference is to a point or period of time in the past; i. e. , it does not matter whether at the moment of speech the book is actually completed. What is indicated is that at a point or period in the past the book was being written. This is clearly shown in the following examples, where there is a direct contrast of time-spheres, Past and Non-Past:

Antes comía una manzana, ahora come una pera.
Antes escribía una novela, ahora escribe una pieza teatral.

Atelic + Imperfect:

Juan cantaba.

The "action" is perfected and the event or series of events is considered without reference to beginning or end. The time reference may be to either a point or period of time in the past. The remarks about time-spheres made with regard to the "telic - Imperfect" combination also hold for this combination, as in:

Hace unos años cantaba muy bien, ahora canta muy mal.

where the Past and Non-Past time-spheres are in direct contrast.

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